

ALAN CLAYSON'S ARGOSY 2005



Distressing details aren't necessary, but, during the opening bars of a Steeleye Span concert in the dying weeks of 2004, a nightmare of a man plonked himself next to me, obliging me to change seats by the closing cadence. Why do I always seem to end up near people like that? A few months later, I came close to "theatre rage" during Reelin' And Rockin', an extravaganza starring Dave Berry, Wayne Fontana, Brian Poole, Dave Dee, Mike Pender of the "unofficial" Searchers and, without the other Merseybeats, Tony Crane. Behind me, some bloke was keeping up a grating and rapid-fire running commentary on the proceedings. After I requested him to kindly shut up, this dropped to muttered conspiracy about what he intended to do to me at the intermission.

It didn't come to more than him glowering over his pint, but, apart from that, the recital utilised my time in an agreeable if unchallenging way as the principals rode roughshod over the individual ravages of old age via a cyclical presentation similar to that in Jack Good's pioneering Oh Boy! TV show in the late 1950s. A given vocalist, backed by a combo common to all, gave 'em a number or two, and then vacated the central microphone for the next in the queue. At times, they followed each other so quickly that the audience - apart from my jabbering dingbat - scarcely had pause to draw breath.

More my bag was Arthur Brown's Otherworld at the Astoria up London's West End in March. A celebration of the God of Hellfire's forty years in the business, it spanned every familiar trackway...Kingdom Come; the predominantly-acoustic recitals he usually does nowadays, and, of course, the Crazy World (complete with the "Fire Suite" in its entirety). At one point, Arthur was dangling on a crucifix with his head in a hollowed-out television, plastic tits on his chest, and outsize Coca-Cola tins round his calves: psychedelic or what?

While no-one could pretend that this is what it must have been like down Middle Earth, circa 1967, the whole occasion was unquestionably a "happening" from Arthur's pre-recorded reading of his own erotic prose as the venue filled to a support bill consisting of Pete Brown - most easily remembered as Cream's most adept wordsmith - reciting his vers libre; Lene Lovich, ostensibly unchanged since her optimum commercial moment with "Lucky Number"; an a capella soprano from Tibet, and a group centred on Captain Sensible, whose over-running was a factor that forced Phil May and - all the way from the Isle of Wight - Dick Taylor to prune their slot down to one item, bedevilled by unbalanced sound.

The previous fortnight, I had also performed "I Can't Be Satisfied" among several songs - most conspicuously, an alarming "Paint It Black" - with Dick and other musicians on the Saturday evening of a Brian Jones Fan Club convention in a Cheltenham hotel. Further special guests included Richard Hattrell - once the Jones boy's much put-upon best pal - and Pat Andrews, mother of one of Brian's children. She's a charming lady who'd been my - platonic - "date" when I compered a Yardbirds bash in Twickenham a year earlier.

A tipsy Richard couldn't stop falling off his chair, and my voice was shot through having to lead rehearsals during the afternoon before the PA system was assembled, darting hither and thither on whipcord legs. Into the bargain, Dick and I, with our respective "constant companions", repaired to

a local restaurant for one of these nouvelle cuisine meals that leave you famished and disproportionately out-of-pocket. Yet the Brian Jones weekend was, well, "interesting", partly because of a wide spectrum of all ages and nationalities - some from as far afield as the USA, Scandinavia - and Holland, one of whose representatives emerged from the audience to entertain us with impressive renditions of more Stones favourites associated with the deceased founder of the feast. For a different perspective, try www.brianjonesfanclub.com

The most significant Clayson event during the first half of 2005, however, was a return to the stage after an absence of over a year. When I arrived with Chris Gore, my keyboard player and road manager, the RMA Tavern near the Portsmouth docks didn't seem the most high profile vehicle of a comeback, but I'm mighty relieved - particularly as my son Jack and his retinue turned up - to tell you that it was a successful, if rather rough-and-ready engagement, earning me a booking the following month with The Muffin Men, a Liverpool outfit in artistic debt to Frank Zappa to the extent of employing former Mother of Invention Jimmy Carl Black ("the Indian of the group") as "featured singer". This took place at the end of Southsea pier - where I'd hammered keyboards in Dave Berry's Cruisers exactly twenty years before.

For both the right and wrong reasons, it was was memorable night. It ended prematurely in a stand-up row with Chris Gore who, deciding he didn't like The Muffin Men, threatened to dump my equipment on the pavement and drive off without me unless I was in the passenger seat within ten minutes. Then followed a journey in an atmosphere you could cut with a knife as I pondered not only who I could get to replace him, but also - and this was, admittedly, a bit childish - who could compose a new melody to "Heedless Child", the only fruit of a Clayson-Gore songwriting amalgam. Jim McCarty? Wreckless Eric? Dick Taylor? Robb Johnston? Des De Moor? Graham Larkbey? I'd have penned one myself if only his tune to my lyrics wasn't so embedded.

On the plus side, Dick had crossed the Solent to join us throughout a set in which his Pretty Things' "Don't Bring Me Down", a vignette of "Terry" by Twinkle, and an encore of "The Ham", a Charles Aznavour translation, were the only non-originals. The occasion was filmed for - and this will beggar belief - a documentary about me that the production company is going to offer to Channel Four. When watching the rushes, I was taken aback at what a painted old dame I had become, looking just like Vanessa Redgrave in the Royal Shakespeare Company's recent season of Hecuba.

My fifty-three-year-old self was there for Britain at large to see in April, namely all twenty seconds of me pontificating about The Beach Boys' Pet Sounds during a countdown of what Channel Four viewers have deemed the hundred greatest albums ever released. I would have picked hardly any of them myself, and I will conclude this paragraph with the suspicion that the final choices boiled down to much the same rallying of fan club memberships as those that placed Gareth Gates, a starlet who emerged from Pop Idol, at Number Eleven in a list of the Greatest Britons Who Ever Lived in one national newspaper survey.

My own contributions to the popular press were restricted to obituaries and reviews. Of more import has been the continuation of The Rolling Stones biography series until it was truncated by the publishers - after the completion of books on Brian, Charlie, Keith and Mick - as soon as the editor who commissioned the project left the firm. If Bill Wyman has an inferiority complex, I would imagine that the non-appearance of a tome on him will make it worse.

Nevertheless, as this door closed, another opened - or, to be precise, re-opened. A Clayson and the Argonauts double-CD retrospective has been issued in time for the Yuletide sell-in by Damaged Goods, a London record company specialising in acts contemporaneous with us such as The Rezillos and The Adverts. Most of my/our advance went on sorting out the salvageable tapes - especially the miles of in-concert material (though there's only so many fantastic versions of "Landwaster" that can be absorbed in one session) - and finishing off two promising tracks abandoned decades ago when the money ran out.

This exhumation also involved a one-off regrouping of not so much Clayson and THE Argonauts as Clayson and AN Argonauts. The official reunion was on Saturday the 3rd of December 2005 at the ultra-trendy Metro in London's West End with Project Adorno and The Otters, but the first public recital in two decades took place nine days earlier at the White Hart, the only pub in Hampstead Norreys, a village deep in the heart of rural Berkshire. Billed as "Mystery Band" on a solitary poster, this backwater dress rehearsal took place in front of around forty, most of them

very local curiosity-seekers with but the vaguest leaked information about what was on that Thursday night.

Well, we went down a storm in the teeth of malfunctioning PA monitors and the absence of a stage: three encores with enough yelling and stamping for more besides; much lionising afterwards, and a drive home buoyed by both optimism and trepidation about what lay ahead the following week. Indeed, in the darkest hours during the build-up, I imagined myself waking up on the morning with the mother of all sore throats; howling at the Moon in the late afternoon as an AA patrolman shakes his head over an over-charging alternator on the M4's hard shoulder, and The Otters valiantly over-running as we reel into the Metro, hot and bothered, and then shamble onto the boards without a soundcheck to deliver a truncated codswallop special to an audience consisting of the support acts, the cloakroom attendant's barking dog and a couple of blokes who leave after the first number, setting off a fire-extinguisher on the way out.

Instead, the entire day was a joy. The three-man crew - Paul, Percy and Bill - functioned with the quiet efficiency of a Royal Navy clipper, and the Argonauts and I fired on all cylinders from start to finish before a near-capacity crowd of all ages, from some who'd followed us virtually from the beginning to others for whom Clayson and the Argonauts had preceded consciousness. Possibly, a few turned up too because we'd been described - not entirely accurately - in Time Out as "one-time punk-rock contenders, mentioned in the same breath as Wreckless Eric and Tom Robinson".

By "we", I mean me and the five other middle-aged men whose younger selves had loomed large in the legend. Violinist and keyboard player Drew Taylor, for example, had been a foremost Argonaut during our "wilderness years", and I'd known drummer Alan Barwise and, on tenor saxophone and flute, John Harries when we were all obnoxious adolescent undergraduates in nineteen-seventy-forget-about-it. Yet, if anyone deserved the title of "musical director", it was guitarist Pete Cox, the Sid James to my Tony Hancock, who went far beyond the call of duty to make it work as we laboured throughout autumn and winter in a boat house attached to the house of bass guitarist Garry Jones, who also headed the team responsible for the Sunset On A Legend artwork.

At fifty-one. Garry was the most junior member of an Argonauts battle-hardened by the music business, whether Drew Taylor who, perhaps despite himself, achieved qualified fame in the field of country-and-western - or Garry himself, versatile enough to have been hired by such disparate entertainers as Annette Peacock and Chuck Berry.

So it was that the finest edition of Clayson and the Argonauts ever assembled slew 'em at the Metro, even exacting submission from those who might not have wanted to like us - and, when we'd finished, I ran into at least one ex-manager, several former Argonauts, two fans who'd flown in from the USA, and another who'd arrived from France. (Further details about both this night-of-nights and the double-CD retrospective that motivated it may be investigated via the links in the left hand column).

Finally, it was gratifying to notice a contingent that had attended on the strength of recent Clayson solo engagements in and around the metropolis, commencing with one at the Poetry Cafe, off Covent Garden, which so mesmerized a certain Martin Dowsing, mainstay of Hungry Dog, a combo whose maiden EP was part-produced by Wreckless Eric, that he booked me to headline on Guy Fawkes Night at the Twelve Bar, a club along Denmark Street - once London's Tin Pan Alley for its clotting of music publishing firms and equipment shops.

Admittedly, the Twelve Bar is one of the smallest venues in the city centre, and the geography of its interior is such that those in the gallery could view only my head and shoulders, and customers elsewhere had to be content watching my legs - and those of Wreckless Eric, who was my backing outfit both then and two evenings later on the Battersea Barge - anchored in the Thames - with Project Adorno and a remarkable performance artiste named Jane Bom-Bane (www.janebombane.co.uk). Her slot was conspicuous too for the frightening dexterity of Nick Pynn, who also serves in Arthur Brown's present Crazy World.

Though it was a Monday, the place was quite full - which was the karma, I suppose, for the £50 penalty charge I received before the week was out owing to my straying into London's congestion zone on the way there, and private anxiety - subsequently unfounded - that I'd been "flashed" when speeding beneath a motorway bridge when hurtling home. Then there was the short-notice

cancellation in September of a Clayson extravaganza at Great Torrington's Plough Arts Centre in the wilds of north Devon.

The only other significant episodes in my performing career in the latter half of 2005 included a return to the Sanctuary in Brighton with my son Harry as minder. He "bounced" some half-wit who'd barged in without paying to shatter a glass in front of the stage during the "Sol Nova" finale.

Three months later, I was a "music writer and personality" spouting out what amounted to an after-dinner speech without the dinner in a conference room attached to Twickenham Rugby Stadium. The occasion was centred on a photographic exhibition depicting the dear, dead days of Eel Pie Island's celebrated hotel palais and its cradling of the likes of The Rolling Stones, The Pretty Things, The Yardbirds - and The Downliners Sect. Their Don Craine reeled in the years with a most amusing and informative talk. So did Art Wood before emoting his "Hoochie Coochie Man" signature tune with a costumed trad jazz band, once regulars at Eel Pie prior to the onslaught of the beat boom. Next, Art joined an ad hoc amalgam comprising various Downliners Sectarians, Atomic Roosters, Mott The Hooplars and more of the usual parochial suspects.

As has become customary too, I had consulted Art, Don and others present when undertaking a latest literary project with a musical emphasis. Published in autumn by Chrome Dreams, it wasn't so much a biography as a series of essays about, well, "aspects" of Keith Moon that have interested me, punctuated with hitherto untold tales directly from metaphorical horses' mouths. When this was first suggested by the commissioning editor, I thought it was a stupid idea, especially in the light of Tony Fletcher's *Dear Boy: The Life Of Keith Moon* (Omnibus, 1998), but, following heart-searching arithmetic, I signed the contract and ventured into areas of the Moon unexplored by even Fletcher.

Somehow, during a very crowded few months, I found time for recreational activities. Most germane to this discussion was someong having a spare ticket for a one-man show by Jimmy Webb ("Up Up And Away", "MacArthur Park", "Witchita Lineman" and all that), just him and a piano for ninety-odd minutes of songs and anecdotes that were sufficiently absorbing for me to go to his merchandising stall to tell him I'd enjoyed his book, *Tunesmith: The Art Of Songwriting* (Hyperion, 1998).

Jimmy was OK, but he was lost in the shadow of *Telstar*, a play about Joe Meek at London's New Ambassadors Theatre near Drury Lane. Actually, I went twice to one of the most emotionally draining presentations I've ever witnessed. The acting of Con O'Neill, who portrayed Joe in his gradual deterioration from the top of his game to homicidal paranoia, was off the radar. You shouldn't have missed *Telstar* any more than you should have missed Clayson and the Argonauts at the Metro. If we'd been rubbish, believe me, I'd have told you.